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GOLF AND THE PHILOSOPHIC MIND

BY THE REV. JOHN ARCHIBALD MACCALLUM

THE rapid growth in the popularity of golf makes it a safe prophecy that within a generation every town of 5,000 inhabitants from the Arctic circle to the Rio Grande, and perhaps beyond, will have its course and its many devotees of the game. With increasing leisure due to shorter hours and intensified production large numbers of people from the classes who at present do not know a brassie from a niblick will become enthusiastic golfers. It is obvious that when once the game is imbedded in the fabric of the national consciousness it will exercise an increasing influence upon the mental outlook of the people, and will modify their habits and interests in no small measure.

So much has been thought, said and written about golf as a physical restorative, or means of rejuvenation, that it would be difficult for even an Addison or a Swift to make any contribution in knowledge or inspiration from this point of view. On the other hand, what may be roughly called the spiritual effect has received much less attention, and it will be worth while to devote some consideration to that phase of this modernized ancient game, which is equally fascinating to statesmen, philosophers, captains, kings, and the humblest salesman whose financial status allows him to buy only a few second-hand clubs for use on Sunday on the municipal course. If Coleridge were engaged to-day in cataloguing his *Aids to Reflection*, golf would have a place in the list if not as a direct, yet certainly as an indirect, means to that desirable goal.

A man may make a tiresome speech or write a poor essay and still live on in the happy illusion that he has done a creditable or even brilliant piece of work. When the mind is flowing easily, there is a soothing charm in the sound of one's own voice which disarms all suspicion of ineffectiveness, so that a public speaker

never knows that he is dull. If in addition he is unfortunate enough to have flatterers around him, their words lend an easy confirmation to his estimate of himself. But if he makes a poor stroke in golf there is no possible ground for self-deception and the most unscrupulous sycophant dares not pretend to see any virtue in the performance. At best he can only fall back on the platitude that his friend is not "up to his game", or that his failure is due to the weather or some other uncontrollable cause. Such suggestions, however, bring little consolation to the defaulter and may even result in positive irritation.

Here we have one of the inherent reasons for the popularity of golf, for, however questionable our business or professional ethics, there is at the core of every man's soul a profound reverence for the truth. And while success or failure in golf depends in some degree upon subjective conditions, when once purpose is translated into action the result is so concrete as to be beyond dispute. One might as reasonably debate the proposition that four times three are twelve as to argue whether the ball is in the cup or not where a putt has fallen short. Because of this objectivity golf has an excellent effect upon morals, or at least upon manners. Few persons underrate themselves, and when they seem to do so their apparent modesty is usually inverted egotism. But in the ordinary interests of life it is difficult for the most strenuous "uplifter" to reduce the self-esteem of his neighbors to reasonable proportions. The issues are rarely clear enough to justify the attempt. I have a friend who is convinced that her three children are the cleverest and wisest prattling youngsters on the continent, and that after them follow closely the triumvirate ruling her sister's household. On this platform they have together organized a mutual admiration society whose minutes and deliberations are enervating to everyone outside the inner circle, who by force of circumstance is compelled to listen. In addition to this inflated estimate of the virtues of her own progeny, there is the reflex tendency to discount the virtues of all the other children of the clan and to ignore those of her neighbors. Theoretically, as a Christian and lover of truth, I should try to correct this distorted perspective, but I recoil from the task, for I feel instinctively that it is beyond my powers. *Chacun à son goût.* There is

no way by which I could demonstrate to an auto-intoxicated mother that little Jackie's gibberish is no more indicative of genius than that of Angelo, the gardener's son of equal age.

When, however, we turn to golf, we are on a different plane and much closer to reality—or at least that phase of reality which we can understand. If I am fortunate enough to make a hole in par and my opponent has taken one or two more strokes, because he got into the bunker, we both understand because we are talking the same language and thinking in the same terms. He may be unable to repress the futile impulse to picture how differently it would have turned out if he had not been in the bunker, but I am not selfish enough to deny him such consolation as he derives from these *post mortem* considerations. The fact is, I won the hole. Self-esteem does not flourish in this air unless it is supported by the score. One's stroke is his child, but that does not blind the fondest parent to the fact that it is weak or badly deformed, for the deformity is registered in the rough where the ball lies off the course.

Recently I made an important discovery in social psychology, which I am glad to give unpatented to the technical sociologists for further elucidation. I have happily hit upon the reason for the preëminence of the Scots as philosophers, statesmen and theologians. This is due to their having been golfers for a sufficient number of generations to have inherited a large unearned increment from the game. Nor is this result at all surprising, for he is singularly lacking in imagination who is not prompted to reflection as he observes the close parallel between the vicissitudes of golf and life. When for example by a brilliant approach which drops within three feet of the pin one reaches the eighteenth green "even up", while his opponent's ball is some thirty feet away, it seems justifiable to conclude that victory is assured. But how disconcerting it is to have your rival, rendered desperate by the apparent hopelessness of his position, send the ball by a sweeping curve into the cup! "How lucky!" you say; with immediate recriminations of conscience, for you know that if the stroke had been yours you would be flattering yourself on your skill in determining the line of approach and in using your putter as an instrument of precision. These considerations disturb

your inward calm and the disturbance is enhanced by the reflection that unless you "sink" your ball the day is lost. The attempt is made, but in this mental condition it is doomed to fail. The ball jumps the cup and the hoped for laurel passes to your rival.

Here the philosopher rises from the unimportant place he normally holds in your sub-conscious mind and taking control of your personality makes you say: "In life the margin between success and failure is equally narrow. How many men have been on the edge of being President of the United States, but never reached the goal! How often the advantage of to-day fades away to-morrow!" From such observations and reflections the Scot has learned to make those subtle distinctions between swans and geese, and other confusingly similar entities, which lift him to the high place he holds in the councils of the thinkers and theologians. If, on the other hand, such a noisy and turbulent game as baseball, with its swiftness of action so destructive to meditation, had been developed in Scotland, doubtless they would have been importing their preachers instead of exporting archbishops and cabinet officers to England, and like ourselves would have been under the necessity of organizing Chautauquas and inventing other mechanics of culture.

These are disquieting days for the theologian, as his craft is in penumbra, but every situation has its compensations, and not least of these for him is the fact that he is one of the chief beneficiaries of golf. I am not thinking of the recreative returns he enjoys in common with all other players, but of those confirmations of his tenets which come from this unexpected source. Suppose he is a Calvinist, laboring under the uneasy suspicion that his central dogma of election is not so secure as it seemed to his grandfather. With this doubt smouldering under the placid surface of his temporary interests, he seeks relief on the links and makes a drive to the green on a 225-yard hole much to his own surprise and that of his opponent, whose ball falls into a hazard short and off the course. The hole seems certain; but alas, for the insecurity of all unrealized certitudes! His rival, with the poise which comes from having nothing to lose, makes a splendid recovery with his mashie niblick. The ball shoots heavenward,

pauses as though suspended by a cord for a fraction of a second high above the green, then like a thing endowed with self-determination, drops straight to earth and comes to rest within two feet of the pin. The erstwhile elated ecclesiastic, unnerved by this unexpected turn of fortune, takes three putts and loses the hole, yet the result is even more profitable for him than if he had won. He learns from his own experience that "many are called but few are chosen". Predestination thus reënforced becomes a vital part of his outlook upon life. Doubts will never again undermine this element in his faith. "There's a divinity that shapes our ends." If you are not of the elect the happiest of beginnings will not insure your arrival. The splendid start may culminate in disaster, the initial failure in ultimate success. No wonder the Calvinists have won so many prizes, with this stern philosophy to support their hopes!

The dominant theme of the preachers of every faith has always been the breadth and smoothness of the way that leads to destruction, with multitudes gaily moving toward their doom, and conversely the narrowness of the path that leads to life, with few who are wise or fortunate enough to choose it. Stridently the preacher's voice has been raised in every age to warn his contemporaries against the allurements of the road to Vanity Fair. But whatever the explanation, there are few who listen, or at any rate show much inclination for the narrow way. The multitudes remain uninterested in posterity and undisturbed by hectic descriptions of the badness of their generation. At most they have only an academic interest in the virtues of their grandmothers and seem perfectly content to go on to destruction, probably on the principle that it is better to take the cash and let the credit go, as the day of reckoning is so far off. Yet lonely and disheartened though the preacher is, when he doffs his dog collar and sallies forth in negligé shirt and knickerbockers with driver in hand, the truth of this ancient doctrine is strikingly confirmed. As he takes his stand on the teeing ground, the through green looks wide enough for giants to play with cannon balls. Surely it will be easy to keep within these ample expanses. But the slightest error in direction when stretched over a radius of two hundred yards is fraught with the gravest consequences. The

ball sails out into the far country of the prodigal and drops out of bounds in the rough where its retrieval imposes a heavy penalty. For generations the youth of Scotland have been led by actual experience in getting off the course to ponder on the evil results of leaving the narrow way. It is not strange therefore that from this soil a race of preachers has sprung, who have gone out over the world to warn their brothers of every race against the nemesis that will undo them if they refuse to leave the path of dalliance and hasten through the strait gate along the narrow way which alone leads to the hospice of St. Peter.

Among the many causes which account for a golfer's loss of direction, the most important is failure to "follow through". No matter how decisive and well aimed the stroke up to the hitting of the ball, if he stops there and does not send his clubhead after it, as David threw his sling toward Goliath's head, thus making the second half of the stroke a counterpart of the first, he loses control of the direction and shortens the distance. Here also golf is a commentary on life. In education, business, politics, religion, it is the second mile that counts. Anyone can take the first; then the pull begins which eliminates the crowd. If we could only master the art of "following through", what a host of failures would be avoided! We pause on the edge of success and lose control of the effort we have already made. There are many people who are great at starting things. They are so full of enthusiasm when setting forth their plans that those of us of colder temperament become introspective and disturbing questions rise in our minds as to whether we are lacking in sympathy or zeal. However, we are reassured when we again meet our buoyant friends, for in the meantime their ardors have cooled and they have turned to other issues.

We have an illustration in our educational methods. Our instructors have many bright ideas and work out interesting programmes on paper. But the layman has a suspicion that they fly from one experiment to another and that underneath all our self-assurance concerning the efficiency of American schools there is a widespread failure to "follow through". Mr. Wells is credited with a statement to the effect that every village is potentially an Athens. If there is no reason to doubt the truth

of this observation, the tragedy of the gulf between the potential and the actual is all the more distressing and should shatter our self-complacency. That the rank and file of our newspaper readers are more interested in the morbid details of the underworld than in statecraft, the spread of ideas and the advance in the arts and sciences, is sufficient evidence of inadequate education; though we admit that there is a romance about crime, and a strong human interest must always belong to temptation, justice and revenge.

Our most striking failure to "follow through" is in politics. It is a truism that the administration of our cities is for the most part in the hands of men who are not equipped for so important a task either ethically, intellectually or socially. The public is aware of this and from time to time rises from its uneasy slumbers and drives out the men who are exploiting the community for personal ends. Then in the happy belief that the warfare is over and that the good citizens can take a rest, they go to sleep again. But there is no sleep for political leaders of the baser sort. They work continually and are never discouraged. They know that while Samson slumbers they can shear his locks, and patiently wait their time. One factor in the equation which insures the success of their method is the exaggerated idea in the public mind as to the value of victory in any single case. When the so-called "better elements"—the "Voters' League", or "Citizens' Committee"—rouse themselves for action, they promise much more than they can fulfil. The man in the street, with no knowledge of history and consequently a short memory, is disappointed with the results and feels that he has been duped. He sees little difference between good and bad government so far as his personal interests are concerned, and is perhaps irritated by the loss of certain privileges he might have obtained through influence under the old order. A reaction sets in and at the next election the "bosses" return to power. It is well for the Prohibitionists that they reënforced their position by a Constitutional Amendment; otherwise they would have been unable to hold their gains in large areas of the country. Here, too, the initial enthusiasm indicated by the prospectus is not sustained. For two generations we were fed with the assurance that poverty

and crime would fade out into contentment and universal virtue with the outlawing of intoxicants. The record of the daily paper is a continuous proof of the falsity of the assurance.

With the signing of the Armistice the world went into wild ecstasies, utterly blind to the law that the ill effects of the direction in which mankind has been moving for years with fatal inertia could not be abolished in an hour. Unrestrained zeal and undisciplined hope have also been the bane of organized religion. Too often the churchman finds himself spiritually bankrupt, because he has used all his capital in his initial blow against ancient evils, and has none left for the more important task of reforming and refining the business, industry, amusements and politics of the present. In a recently published sermon by a noted divine, the ancient heathen were scathingly denounced for offering children as sacrifices to the fiery Moloch, but the good man had no suspicion that the same crime is practised to-day on an immeasurably wider scale in the sacrifice of multitudes of little ones to the machine, the "Iron Man" who is High Priest to the God of Profits—more cruel and insatiable than any ancient deity. Such errors will never be corrected until we learn to "follow through".

Another fundamental law of golf is that the eye must be kept upon the ball. Let it waver for a fraction of a second at the critical moment, and the shot is lost. None can hope for success who is unable to give undivided obedience to this rule, and if a man obeys, whatever his faults he will have a place in the inner circle of those who play the game. Impatience is the reason why so many who are anxious for distinction disregard this law. They cannot wait to see the result of the shot, and in their anxiety look up, and spend their strength in vain. This desire for quick returns is one of the underlying causes for the distemper and confusion of our age. Everywhere men are seeking short cuts to their goals. Haste for education, wealth and power weakens the framework of society by contributing to the spread of jealousy and the neglect of spiritual values. How often money brings more pain than joy because its possessor had not the patience to acquire the qualities which would enable him to use it to advantage! The realms of literature and art are closed to him as he

tries to buy what cannot be bought with the currency he has to offer. Even though he travels over the world, Egypt, Greece and Italy are commonplace in comparison with Main Street. Years ago I was told by a wealthy grocer that there was nothing worth seeing in the British Museum. In traveling over Europe he discovered no monument so interesting as a big American "department store".

The disciplined golfer opens the way to the avoidance of such errors. His attention is fixed upon the immediate aspects of his task only because he never loses sight of his ultimate goal. He knows how bad a bargain it is to be greedy for immediate results. Hence he plays the game patiently and in accordance with its laws, for this is the only way to realize his purpose. Any other method will defeat the end in view. He wants no victory at the cost of chivalry. He knows that others are playing and have the same rights as his upon the course. Hence he does not try to crowd in ahead of them or force his way through them, or ask for special privileges. The law of golf applies equally to all, and is implicitly obeyed by every real initiate of the game.

But I have not mentioned the inmost secret of the fascination that golf exercises upon its devotees. It is the game of perpetual hope. The score of yesterday may be lowered to-day. Even with the abating force of years there is always ground for faith that through increasing skill the player can overcome this handicap and reach a place of distinction not yet attained. Thus golf renews youth and extends the length of life. If Bernard Shaw's belief that in time earthly existence may be prolonged to three hundred years is ever realized, golf will certainly be one means. And when through growth of facilities and increased opportunity for play, the milieu which I have suggested has been created, the favored inhabitants of this country will be well on their way toward the ideal republic by a much shorter and more interesting route than that offered by repressive legislation.

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